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HEADLINE: Polling swayed mayoral race;
Stokes, Conway withdrew when Bundley refused to drop O'Malley challenge

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BODY:

Two candidates considered to have the best chances of unseating Mayor Martin O'Malley decided this week against challenging the incumbent in September because a lesser-known challenger refused to bow out.

Former City Councilman Carl Stokes and state Sen. Joan Carter Conway decided Monday to not run against O'Malley in the Sept. 9 primary after high school principal Andrey Bundley refused to heed their polls showing only they could beat the mayor.

Their decisions give O'Malley what many say will be an easy re-election campaign against a cast of contenders with little name recognition and nowhere near his campaign's more than \$2.8 million bankroll.

Stokes and Conway said their polls showed that one of them could have defeated O'Malley on his or her own -- if no other black candidate entered the race and drew from the same constituency. They said their chances diminished with Bundley running, and that Bundley would not stand a chance running alone.

Stokes and Conway said they discussed the polls with Bundley, a political novice who is principal of Walbrook High Uniform Services Academy. Bundley could not be reached for comment yesterday, but he has said in interviews that he is in the race to win.

Stokes filed for mayor June 13 but said he has been considering results of his privately commissioned polls for weeks. He last discussed them with his campaign staff at state Del. Curtis S. Anderson's downtown office shortly before Monday's 9 p.m. filing deadline. He then decided to give Conway the leeway to challenge O'Malley by stepping aside and instead filing to run for City Council president.

He said he did not want to see a repeat of the 1999 campaign, when the black vote was split between O'Malley,

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Stokes and Lawrence A. Bell III.

"I care too much for my city to send it down that road again," Stokes' official statement about his withdrawal said.

Conway nearly filed to challenge O'Malley, repeatedly standing in line at the Board of Elections counter.

"I would have run if I was the only one in the race," Conway said yesterday. She said she waited until the last minute to see if Bundley would pull out. If he had withdrawn, she said, she would have challenged O'Malley "all the way live."

But as she stood in the crowded lobby of the Board of Elections Monday night -- cell phone in one hand, her filing papers in the other -- she received a call telling her that Bundley was not withdrawing from the race.

"I did not expect him to withdraw," Conway said.

Bundley, 42, is joined in his campaign against O'Malley in the Sept. 9 Democratic primary by several other candidates: Marvin Ray Jones, 55; A. Robert Kaufman, 72, a socialist activist; Anton J.S. Keating, 59, a criminal defense attorney; Charles U. Smith, 53, a one-time candidate for Congress; and Dominique Stevenson, 38, who said she was a co-director of a social justice center but refused to name it.

O'Malley's campaign officially stated that he was running to win, regardless of who entered or withdrew from the race.

"The mayor has always said, regardless of who files, that the election will be about what his administration has accomplished in his first term and what he envisions for the next," Colleen Martin-Lauer said Monday, reading from a statement.

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